# Empirical Pragmatism and its Potential: Toward Deepening “Inquiry”


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# Empirical Pragmatism and its Potential:
## Toward Deepening "Inquiry"

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## 1. Introduction

The intellectual historical development of pragmatism and its inherent potential have already been discussed in various contexts and from various perspectives. Today, many useful research findings have been presented that have discovered its significance, particularly in terms of its affinity to analytic philosophy.

This paper seeks to discover the contemporary significance of pragmatism by approaching it from a different perspective. The discussion in this paper will be developed as follows: Richard Rorty once made a theme of dynamic reality, discussing creativity and contingency in experience in light of the nature of a pragmatism's flexible theory of truth unbound by formality. However, this interpretation was seen by some as to have invited critiques of pragmatism as a form of relativism or simple pragmatics, and today, the rehabilitation of pragmatism as a scientific inquiry has been asserted by thinkers like Cheryl Misak. Here too, however, people's processual ideas and concepts about dynamic reality have simply been retained as they are. Hilary Putnam's "natural realism" has depicted such inquiries as essential human experience. If we regard inquiry as the basic model of experience, "the occurrence of problems" can be set as its starting point. By doing so, the development of experience comes to be described as the process of dealing with problems that occur in each instance, a concept that is also found in transcendental empiricism by Gilles Deleuze. Scope for pragmatism's developmental potential can be found not only in the context of analytic philosophy but also in the context of transcendental empiricism, which adopts the empirical model of "inquiry" to interrogate its developmental settings. In the following, I would like to work through this idea step by step.

## 2. Solidarity and Creativity: The Essence of Rorty's Pragmatism

Although Rorty's interpretation of pragmatism has been and continues to be critiqued in a variety of ways, these have more often than not been directed at his emphasis for a relativistic theory of truth. In fact, Rorty himself acknowledged that his pragmatism was relativistic. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the crux of his claim, by means of a thorough relativization of truth, lay in the promotion of a theory of truth which held that "what is useful is the truth." In my view, the essence of Rorty's pragmatism is his development of the themes of the genesis of experience and the transformative nature of reality. I would like to briefly look at Rorty's pragmatism while focusing on this point.

The basis of Rorty's pragmatism is formed by "anti-foundationalism" and "anti-essentialism," which eschew the entrenchment of universal values. Rorty's stance that the rejection of universality entails the need for "a new way of speaking" can be glimpsed, for example, in the following passage from his monograph on *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). Here, he regards differences in philosophical discourse as differences in how "vocabularies" are used and then advances the claim that the use of vocabulary is fundamentally based in creative acts.

> As long as we think that there is some relation called "fitting the world" or "expressing the real nature of the self" which can be possessed or lacked by vocabularies-as-wholes, we shall continue the traditional philosophical search for a criterion to tell us which vocabularies have this desirable feature. But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that *languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences.[1]

For Rorty, the use of vocabulary to more faithfully represent the world assumes that a permanent and unchanging truth exists beyond our own world, and such usage is performed to seek out that truth. However, it would be a mistake to say that this one usage occupies a privileged position relative to all other vocabulary usages. Rather, in the case of "expressing one's own true nature" as described above, it may be more appropriate to express this using poetic language than with logical descriptions using conventional philosophical terminology. Extending this claim, Rorty develops his own argument by replacing the notion of a universal underlying "objectivity" with that of a "solidarity" that serves as a standard for limited truth in a particular context or community and then proceeds to approach a pragmatism that makes truth judgments based on the usefulness of reality.

Another notable characteristic of his pragmatism is its "anti-representationalism." This characteristic, as seen in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), entails the transformation of the cognitive model that captures the congruence and correspondence between the meanings of objects and concepts into a behavioral model in which "we do not simply 'represent' the world but rather 'cope with (create)' it in some fashion." (Although not detailed here, this behavioral model constitutes the foundation for the contemporary current of pragmatism running through ecological psychology and environmental pragmatism, which take as their theme practical relationships between humans and the world.) In this context, the opposition between theory and assertion is apprehended not from a logical perspective that scrutinizes validity and legitimacy but from a processual perspective wherein individual theories and claims are generated. With this transformation of perspective, the onus of inquiry is shifted from "how much credibility or legitimacy exists" to the question of "what kind of problem is trying to be solved?" Addressing the character of the pragmatism that emerges as a consequence, Rorty offers the following.

> On the pragmatist view I am putting forward, what we call "increased knowledge" should not be thought of as increased access to the Real, but as increased ability to *do* things – to take part in social practices that make possible richer and fuller human lives. This increased richness is not the effect of a magnetic attraction exerted on the human mind by the really real, nor by reason's ability to penetrate the veil of appearance. It is a relation between the human present and the human past, not a relation between the human and the non-human.[2]

Here, as we can see from his claim that "the human present and the human past" will enrich human lives, Rorty adopts a "historicist" position that regards truth as containing elements of historical contingency. In addition to demonstrating an attitude of conformity with past customs, this historicism simultaneously implies that experience is always apprehended from a processual perspective.

Rorty's pragmatism offered a way to highlight scenes of transformation within the empirical processes of contingency and creativity, which tend to be overlooked by essentialist and foundationalist perspectives that emphasize the absolute and universal truth. What I have discussed this far is no more than an outline of Rorty's pragmatism. Nevertheless, I feel that in his stance of excluding universality, objectivity, and static cognitive schema, we get a glimpse of the quintessence

of his reality-oriented thought. The Rortyian liberal ironist idea that the very rejection of universality calls for a new way of speaking shows the pragmatic mechanism of experience and can only be found by adopting the position of pragmatism.

Next, as a counterexample of this interpretation, I would like to take a brief look at the pragmatic perspective arising from attempts by Cheryl Misak, one of today's leading pragmatist thinkers, to rehabilitate the work of Charles Sanders Peirce.

## 3. Reclaiming "Objectivity": Misak's Interpretation of Trends in Contemporary Pragmatism

Why do we need to go back to Peirce to discover the significance of pragmatism? This claim is advanced on the basis of an intention to reinstate what was lost in the development of pragmatism after Peirce. Below, I want to confirm the focus of this problematic through the view of pragmatism advanced by Cheryl Misak, one of its leading proponents (namely, where she locates the essence of pragmatism).

In her introductory preface to *New Pragmatists*, the collected volume for which she served as editor, she writes the following.

> *New Pragmatists* can be seen as the latest contribution to this long-standing set of debates. Some of the papers in this volume explicitly try to reclaim the label 'pragmatism' from a particular interpretation of it—from Richard Rorty's view that there is no truth or objectivity to be had, only solidarity, or agreement within a community, or what our peers will let us get away with saying. But all the papers — even those with no mention of Rorty — are united in their efforts to articulate a position that tries to do justice to the objective dimension of *human* inquiry.[3]

This collected volume consists of papers by researchers who have formed their own position, as a new pragmatism has come after the so-called "neo-pragmatism." According to Misak, their task is to reclaim the objective dimension of human inquiry, particularly in the context of Rorty's pragmatism. Yet, even as she acknowledges the importance of individual beliefs in the context of intellectual inquiry, she emphasizes that the fulfillment of these beliefs is something that is achieved not within a limited community like the "solidarity" spoken of by Rorty, but rather through their incorporation into a body of knowledge buttressed by overall objectivity and universality. This distinction is where Rorty and Misak (i.e., the New Pragmatists) part company in their respective interpretations of pragmatism.

However, this does not mean that she regards the two interpretations as being completely divided. For example, she offers the following points as being held in common by an interpretation of pragmatism that encompasses both.

> Perhaps all we can say our many pragmatists hold in common is a link between belief and action, and the idea that our body of background beliefs or assumptions must be taken seriously in philosophy, inquiry, and life.[4]

For Misak, at a bare minimum, with or without a universal or objective body of knowledge, a basis in "individual beliefs" and "behaviors" constitutes a shared starting point for pragmatism as a whole.

The difference in interpretation between Rorty and Misak seems to have its roots in the differences in their ways of evaluating and positioning the "individual beliefs" discussed therein. Misak attaches great importance to the logical process of intellectual justification as an evaluation of beliefs. In the interpretation of what she calls "the Jamesian or Rortyian idea that truth is the merely useful or approved,"[5] this is measured not so much by intellectual justification as by the more practical, context-focused criterion of "whether something works well in our experience." Although these two interpretations, in addition to maintaining the link between belief and action, share an emphasis on the usefulness

of truth in practical situations, Misak argues the necessity of an objective dimension (i.e., the construction of a body of knowledge) for preventing this from becoming temporary or merely ad hoc.

> The next step in pragmatism is to see that, if beliefs are connected to our actions and expectations, then they can be evaluated in terms of whether those actions are successful and those expectations are met.[6]

As set out in the argument above, Misak considers the establishment of value criteria applicable to all behaviors to be an important point that forms the crux of the debate in pragmatism. Even if experience works well in an ad hoc setting, can we offer any evaluation when we do not know why it worked so well? This point encapsulates the significance she claims for restoring the dimension of objectivity to pragmatism. In this regard, William James once spoke of a method of enabling judgment with reference to a "credit system" of "previous truths" as a criterion for measuring whether an experience had been successful,[7] but this is not to say that he regarded it as applicable to all experiences as a universal truth. In contrast, Misak emphasizes pragmatism as a method of intellectual inquiry whose chief purpose is to seek generally agreed-upon standards in the context of shared belief. Her perspective is well expressed, for example, in the following argument.

> I have argued that the best kind of pragmatism is one that takes the community to be wide and open. Otherwise, we lose our grip on normative notions such as truth, rightness, disagreement, and improvement.[8]

This argument, which discussed an element shared by pragmatism as a whole, clearly seems to be talking about Rorty, who conceived of community systems in a limited way as "solidarity." Rorty adopts pragmatism from the standpoint of advocating disjuncture between communities (i.e., independence) and the multiplicity that results. That is, she takes a contrary position to argue that for "the community to be wide and open" and backed by a certain kind of universality is a condition for "the best kind of pragmatism," which adheres to the normative concepts of distinguishing between truth and falsehood and between right and wrong.

To summarize Misak's argument here, we can say the following: First, the crux of her critique of Rortyan pragmatism lies in its emphasis on objectivity over solidarity to promote the theory of pragmatism as a universal theory of intellectual inquiry. Even if pragmatism's theory of truth relies ultimately on belief, an objective guarantee of what criteria need to be satisfied for that belief to be fulfilled will need to be established as a general body of knowledge shared by all communities. This sense of purpose is encapsulated in the slogan of reclaiming the dimension of objectivity.

The generalization of the criteria (bodies of knowledge) relating to the evaluation of truth, like those that she argues for, was certainly actively developed in the context of Peirce's pragmatism, and it is also true that the meaning of pragmatism gradually changed after the era of James and Dewey. Further, as mentioned earlier, these ideas were ultimately eliminated by Rorty.

However, as we saw earlier, Rorty's pragmatism sounded a warning against an attitude devoted exclusively to awareness fixated on the universal and transcendental nature of truth. Misak, on the contrary, tries to regain pragmatism's original stature as an inquiry by returning to Peirce. Hilary Putnam traversed a middle path between the two by describing inquiry as a natural human endeavor.

## 4. "Inquiry" as a Natural Human Experience: Putnam's Natural Realism

Pragmatism has long been the target of frequent critiques stating that it amounts to relativism or subjectivism. The aforementioned critique by Misak of Rorty was leveled with the same intent. The critique that Peirce leveled against

James's pragmatism made many years before was carried out for the same reason.[9] Yet, what these critics were arguing for was the establishment of pragmatism as a logical method and a way to work hand-in-hand with analytic philosophy to justify this.[10] In this section, I would like to consider natural realism as advanced by Hilary Putnam, which takes a different approach from these to emphasize experience as a method of exploration while still defending the essential aspect of pragmatism as an idea of inquiry. As this idea was originally advanced within the context of analytic philosophy, its critique and scrutiny might normally have to be performed in that context as well. What I want to focus on in this paper, however, is the view of reality that it reveals so as to demonstrate the existence of a point of view that overlaps with the Rortyan interpretation.

Putnam follows the pragmatism of Rorty and James but simply develops it further as "realism." First, he describes "reality" in the following terms.

> The notion that our words and life are constrained by a reality not of our own invention plays a deep role in our lives and is to be respected. The source of the puzzlement lies in the common philosophical error of supposing that the term reality must refer to a single superthing instead of looking at the ways in which we endlessly renegotiate and are forced to renegotiate-our notion of reality as our language and our life develop.[11]

According to Putnam, in the conventional epistemological view, "reality" has been understood as being immutable. In the context of the "internal realism" that he propounded prior to "natural realism," ways of describing the world are regarded as being intrinsically linked to the interests of individual subjects, thereby denying the universality of reality. However, internal realism also entails that a kind of "interface" is established between the inside and outside of the worlds of the self and object so that, ultimately, the scheme that posited the isolation of the self and reality remains identical to the epistemological view. Therefore, in the context of the natural realism that he propounded, the foremost aim was to abolish the interface distinguishing between the inside and outside of these worlds.

While Putnam one-sidedly acknowledges that when we perceive, we apprehend the target of our perception using some kind of method or formulation, this does not mean that he attempted to develop the relativist claim that all perceptions are performed in accordance with our own points of view. Putnam remains in the position that one should accept the "naïve" reality of what he is describing when he says that "The metaphysical realignment I propose involves acquiescence in a plurality of conceptual resources, of different and not mutually reducible vocabularies […] coupled with a return not to dualism but to the 'natural realism of the common man.'"[12] This forms the basis of a "natural" realist view that succumbs to neither relativism nor ideology.

Considering only the fact that they attempt to capture original experience purely in a form that avoids conceptualization, Putnam's and Rorty's claims seem to partially overlap. Even so, Putnam's claim is not developed in as radical a form as Rorty's, which tries to accentuate the creativity and relativity of vocabulary by emphasizing the uncertain nature of truth. The gist of Putnam's claim is to reveal pragmatism's theory of truth, wherein while making allowances for multiple ways of speaking, truth is judged by the "usefulness" that is specifically confirmed, reflected upon, and corrected through trial and error at the stages of thought shown in each way of speaking—as the "natural form of thought" (inquiry). In other words, whereas Rorty promoted relativism by incorporating the concept of a solidarity that transforms into objectivity, Putnam attempted to faithfully describe the form of a thought process that was carried out based on the description of the original, simple form of reality, without resorting to the introduction of a metaphysical or relativist perspective. This attempt of Putnam's can be described as a kind of "attempt to regenerate the life-world,"[13] one that attempts to describe what is occurring in the midst of our involvement with reality without any sort of labeling.

## 5. Pragmatism's Developmental Potential: From the Perspective of Transcendental Empiricism

Thus far, we have quickly surveyed the claims of the major contemporary pragmatists. Although each interpretation was distinct, if one were to deliberately attempt a rough summary of their characteristics, it would be as follows:

(1) Represent processual thought that does not set a starting point in advance
(2) Have an axis of thought that is set externally rather than internally so that there is always the potential of being rewritten
(3) Are always rooted in the humanistic experience of "inquiry"

These characteristics have been inherited by contemporary thinkers, for example by James Gibson, and have been developed in the context of ecological psychology by his theory of affordances. Gibson, like Rorty, accentuates creativity by eliminating universal and fixed meanings. He accomplishes this by regarding human beings not as simple mirrors of nature but as entities that, by working in the environment, are always being placed into relationships.

Furthermore, Gilles Deleuze took a similar position to develop his own unique empiricist approach. His methodology is called "transcendental empiricism." I would like to offer an overview of the contents of this approach here because, in addition to sharing its subject matter with the pragmatism discussed in this paper, it seems to also have implications for the possibility of pragmatism's further development.

What Deleuze had in mind when elaborating his transcendental empiricism was a critique of formalism against the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. While Deleuze has a high regard for the way in which Kant discussed the conditions of experience developed in the context of transcendental philosophy, he critiques the lack of thoroughness with which Kant depicts the conditions of the possibility of that experience and the fact that he has fallen for a "copy" of the empirical. In response to this failure on the part of Kantian philosophy, Deleuze advances a theory based on David Hume's empirical philosophy in a form that supplements the "interrogation of the genesis" of the principles of experience. In the context of a transcendental empiricism based on the framing of a problem such as this, the depiction of "the transcendental" referred to in the name will constitute a basis for understanding.

At a glance, trying to talk about the transcendental, which represents a condition for real experience, from an empirical point of view, seems to be a contradictory enterprise. However, Deleuze tells us that to state the conditions for the formation of experience, it is necessary to incorporate a transcendental perspective that differs from the mere description of phenomena. In doing so, Deleuze attempts to depict the potential of experience as an immanent condition.

For example, Peter Hallward says the following about Deleuze's use of the term "transcendental."

> When Deleuze uses the term transcendental it is to describe creativity as such, creativity subtracted from the constraints of the actual or individual. 'Transcendental' is then just a description of pre-individual reality as it is in itself, in the immanence of its creation and 'underneath' its consolidation in the creature.[14]

The expression "transcendental" in this passage is clearly distinguished from the word "transcendent." According to Hallward, the interpretation of the external conditions of experience, such as are described by capturing a overlooking view of experience, end up being localized as the act of defining the meaning of the generated reality so that eventually it will end up treading the path (i.e., the transcendent method) of apprehending experience in a formalistic manner. In other words, if we take the method of apprehending the composition of experience while relying on the external conditions that transcend that experience, we will not be able to apprehend the real form of reality-as-potential that is

shown by Deleuzian philosophy as a whole.

With this point in mind, Deleuze attempts to depict the empirical domain while excluding a perspective of "the transcendent" and while conforming to the immanence of potential experience. From this perspective, his purpose in the context of transcendental empiricism is to present the formation of real experience.

However, what kind of experience is this "real experience" shown by a transcendental empiricism that has been developed from a thoroughly potential perspective? Part of this is presented alongside the problems surrounding the "transcendental exercise of the faculties" discussed in *Difference and Repetition*.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze develops his own theory of faculties by distinguishing between "transcendent exercise" and "empirical exercise." The expression "transcendent" here is not used in the aforementioned sense of "oriented to an object beyond the world," but rather in the sense of depicting "the fundamental settings in which faculties are generated in the world," which can never be captured from a normal perspective that seeks to localize formalistic experience. For example, in his *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant critiques the transcendent exercise of reason such as that would define objects as corresponding to ideas. While Deleuze basically subscribes to Kant's theory of faculties, he actually develops his theory from the point that these unique faculties are exhibited precisely in cases where they are exercised in "a form that transcends experience." According to Deleuze, faculties are controlled under a *sens commun* in the frame of empirical exercise. This is a stable experience based on the "recognition" of what was assumed in advance by the harmonious workings of sensibility, imagination, and intellect. In contrast, in the context of transcendental empiricism, as described above, what is discussed is the process of escaping from the control of the form of identity and compelling a "genesis of the faculties" that cannot be apprehended by empirical exercise.[15]

The "genesis of thought" that escapes subordination to the already known is problematized from non-recognizable experience that differs from the experience of recognition that is premised on this distinction between the empirical versus the transcendent exercise of the faculties and arises due to the former, in other words, from a real experience like an encounter with something unknown. Although the debate surrounding the underlying potential of experience will eventually materialize from this question of the genesis of thought, it is difficult to show the overall picture in detail here.

The framework of the discussion of transcendental empiricism may not necessarily be consistent with the discussion of pragmatism. In fact, the subject of pragmatism is limited to what Deleuze refers to as the frame of the empirical exercise of the faculties, and the genesis of thought is never even discussed. However, precisely because pragmatism limits the discussion to this frame of empirical use, its purpose is to highlight the original theme of pragmatism—what Putnam calls "inquiry" as "the original form of experience"—as real experience. This is a subject that often tends to be overlooked in the discussion of contemporary analytic philosophical contexts. Examination of the existence (or otherwise) of objectivity and the usefulness theory of truth will certainly be necessary tasks to undertake for the defense of pragmatism. Even so, rather in the form of inquiry, showing the extensibility of experience found by the richness of its substance and abductive reasoning will also be required for pragmatism's sustained development. By going back to Peirce, Misak argued for the reinstatement of pragmatism as a theory of inquiry as well as for its logical legitimacy and its applicability to analytic philosophy. From the standpoint of natural realism, Putnam described pragmatism as a natural way of thinking. The experience of "inquiry" on which both of these arguments rely was described in Deleuze's philosophy in the form of interrogating scenes of "genesis" stripped of its transcendental form. In a similar fashion, by thematizing developmental scenes of inquiry and their processual advancement, we will clear a path for the rehabilitation of Rorty's oft-neglected philosophy. This paper only presents a path for interpretation to follow, but by elaborating on this, it may be possible to discover new possibilities for pragmatism as a theory of inquiry.

## Notes

1. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 6-7.
2. Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism and romanticism," *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Volume 4*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 108.
3. Cheryl Misak (eds.), *New Pragmatists*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 1.
4. Cheryl Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 281.
5. Cheryl Misak, *The American Pragmatists*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 253.
6. Misak[2016], p. 282.
7. William James, *Pragmatism*, Dover Publications, New York, 1995, pp. 80ff.
8. Misak[2016], p. 286.
9. Peirce advocated pragmatism as a means of eliminating metaphysical propositions to apprehend concepts in a scientific way. Accordingly, it is well known that he expressed reservations about the theories of James, who advanced his interpretation by expanding the scope of its consideration to emotional reactions beyond the scientific domain and later described his own theories as "pragmaticism" to show that they represented a distinct understanding.
10. The claims of the authors of the papers collected in *New Pragmatists* (2007), edited by Misak, are a prime example of the adoption of this approach. This perspective is also shared by the pragmatist faction known as the Pittsburgh School of people like Robert Brandom and John McDowell, who advanced a Hegelian pragmatism that has recently been attracting increased attention.
11. Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 9.
12. Putnam, op. cit., p. 38.
13. Regarding this kind of interpretation, see, for example, Dan Zahavi, "Natural Realism, Anti-reductionism, and Intentionality. The "Phenomenology" of Hilary Putnam," *Space, Time, and Culture*, Eds. David Carr, Cheung Chan-Fai, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2004, pp. 235-251.
14. Peter Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creatio*n, London & New York: Verso, 2006, p. 75.
15. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Translated by Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp.143-144.